
PROGRAM NOTES

by Geoffrey D. Decker

An Outdoor Overture, by Aaron Copland (1900-1990)

American composer Aaron Copland's *An Outdoor Overture* is one of his most youthfully exuberant works and appropriately so. Commissioned by Alexander Richter, the Director of Music of New York's famed High School of Music and Art, it was to be, in Richter's own words, "the opening gun" in the school's late 1930s campaign to introduce young players to contemporary American music entitled "American Music for American Youth."

Always more than happy to compose for young people and always wanting to introduce good contemporary American music to young players, Copland jumped at the chance to write his *An Outdoor Overture*. The late American composer Elliott Carter wrote, "Its opening is as lofty and beautiful as any passage that has been written by a contemporary composer. It is Copland in his prophetic vein ... never before has he expressed it so simply and directly."

The overture was published in 1938 and has been successfully transcribed for wind band. In a display of unabashed extroversion, the full orchestra introduces the overture. A long and somewhat carefree trumpet solo immediately follows. A march-like theme abruptly gives way to a lyrical melody in the strings. A second march theme soon returns the listener to the overture's exciting opening music. Finally, other previously heard themes return and bring the work to a very exciting and dynamic ending.

It is interesting to note that the late American conductor Jonathan Sternberg (1919-2018) began his professional career on December 7, 1941, the day the Japanese Empire attacked Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, conducting Copland's *An Outdoor Overture* with the National Youth Administration Orchestra of New York. It is poignant to consider what happened in Hawaii later that day juxtaposed with Copland's very American, youthful and light-hearted overture.

Piano Concerto No. 3 in C Major, Op. 26, by Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)

The Russian composer Serge Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 3 in C Major, Op. 26, began taking shape as early as 1913 in the form of a theme with variations that the the composer quickly set aside until 1916-17 when he revisited them. Later, during a summer holiday in 1921, he finally put his efforts into finishing the work he had started eight years earlier.

After some years of some neglect, the work is now one of the favorites of pianists and public alike. In fact, alongside *Peter and the Wolf*, it might be argued that this concerto is one of his favorite works with even critical acclaim coming from critics around the world.

Unlike his own previous concertos and others' piano concertos that came before, Prokofiev's orchestra plays an important and distinctive part in the work, and Prokofiev's skillful use of

interesting melody, rhythm, orchestration, and lyrical passages mixed with what was then considered modern dissonance makes the piece a joy to listen to; it has greatly increased its popularity too.

The piece has a special connection to our part of the country in that Chicago's Orchestra Hall on South Michigan Avenue saw the work's premiere on December 16, 1921, with the composer at the keyboard and Frederick Stock conducting the Chicago Symphony Orchestra! But the work had to wait to be confirmed as a 20th-century masterpiece until after Prokofiev's countryman, Serge Koussevitzky, championed it at a famous and highly-praised concert in Paris in 1922.

As an aside, although Prokofiev's name and some of his works are well known and beloved among classical music fans, many of his greatest works remain in semi-obscurity, especially for American listeners. Why? It can be explained if we remember that Prokofiev died on the same day the Soviet government announced Stalin's death. Throngs of Stalin's mourners filling the streets prevented the removal of Prokofiev's body from his apartment and, as a final insult, there were no flowers available for his funeral; all had been picked by Soviet soldiers for Stalin's funeral. Because of this coincidence, Prokofiev has been called "Stalin's last victim." Sadly, it is true that Prokofiev continues to be associated with the era of Stalin, an era that, because of the purges and murder of more than 20 million of his own countrymen, is denounced both in Prokofiev's own country and outside Russia. Had Prokofiev lived beyond the era of Stalin, he would surely have cemented his reputation earlier and more of his music would be familiar to all of us.

Symphony No. 3, by Aaron Copland (1900-1990)

Nearing the end of the Second World War, Aaron Copland was already very famous. With his published works, and especially with his three popular ballet scores, *Billy the Kid*, *Appalachian Spring*, and *Rodeo*, Copland defined his musical language, one that people immediately recognized as both American and Copland. The successes of the Allies in both Europe and the Pacific theater of the war spurred a new wave of patriotism and revered American-ness. The time was ripe for Copland to compose a major new work in his uniquely American language.

His prior symphonies each signified the ending of a period of his development. The *Symphony for Organ and Orchestra*, later reworked without organ as his *Symphony No. 1*, signaled the end of his period of study with the great French pedagogue Nadia Boulanger in Paris in the 1920s, and his *Short Symphony (Symphony No. 2)* ended his so-called "constructivist" period of the early 1930s. The opportunity to write a new symphony arrived with a commission from the then music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Serge Koussevitzky, a colleague and champion of the composer and his music since the 1920s. Copland began work on the new symphony in 1944 and delivered it to Koussevitzky. With the premiere of his Third Symphony in Boston on October 18, 1946, Copland's desire to create a work that would "reflect the euphoric spirit of the country at the time" was thoroughly satisfied.

Scored for a large orchestra, Copland uses three of each woodwind instead of the usual two and adds a fourth flute. He also adds a trumpet to the brass section, the piano, and two harps. The

size of the orchestra does not get in the way of Copland's writing tender chamber-like music for groups of instruments throughout the work. The full orchestra gives weight to what Copland described himself as "the grand gesture" in the work, the grandest of all being the inclusion of what is now known as the *Fanfare for the Common Man* in the opening of the symphony's fourth movement.

Copland's Third has been described by many as the quintessential American symphony. Of course, it is pure conjecture and there are certainly other compositions by other American composers that could be said to be "the" quintessential; but, if anything, Copland's Third is high on the heap of great American symphonic works. A composer of symphonies himself, and a great friend and colleague of Copland's, Leonard Bernstein said, "The symphony has become an American monument, like the Washington Monument or the Lincoln Memorial."

Note: When Leonard Bernstein performed Copland's Third Symphony in Israel in 1947, he cut twelve measures from the ending of the fourth movement. Later, the cut was approved by Copland and in 1966, Boosey & Hawkes published the work with the cuts. In June 2015, Boosey & Hawkes published an edition with the cuts restored, and it is that edition that is performed tonight.

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